

May 15, 2016

To: Chairperson IQC

From: Ramdas Lamb, Professor  
Department of Religion  
University of Hawai'i  
Honolulu, HI 96822

Dear Chairperson,

I am writing this to counter the request given to you to insert the term "Dalit" in California textbooks when referring to those traditionally at the bottom of the caste system hierarchy, i.e. those who are currently given the official category of "Scheduled Caste."

Allow me to first give you some context for my comments. I began the study of low caste religious movements in India in the 1970s, when I was a resident of the country, and I have continued to do so up to present day. In addition to the various articles and book chapters I have written on the topic, my book, *Rapt the Name* (SUNY Press, 2002) has been acclaimed both for the subject matter—a previously unknown central Indian Scheduled Caste religious movement—as well as the respect with which the subjects of the study are treated. Moreover, much of my academic career during the last 25 years has involved efforts to help such groups and individuals to be treated with fairness and respect in all spheres of life, including the social and the religious. Thus, I am well aware of the issue of caste, of the mistreatment of those at the bottom, of the use and misuse of the term “Dalit,” and of the way such individuals and groups often become pawns in the agendas of various politically minded groups and individuals, including those with academic credentials.

The term “Dalit” was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the 1800s to refer to those at the bottom of caste society, but it did not come into popular use until the 1970s when a group consisting of some caste members began to refer to themselves as “Dalit Panthers,” inspired by the Black Panthers in the US, who were also fighting for social rights for the oppressed. Later, the term “panther” was dropped, and the group came to be known as “Dalits.” From its inception, the philosophy of the group was not only anti-caste, but anti-Hindu as well. Thus, while it is true that some members of the caste, for varying reasons, claim to still be Hindu but call themselves “Dalit,” no Hindu groups made up of bottom caste members use the term for self-identify. Nevertheless, many journalists in India and academics both in the west and in India continue to try to force the term on them. This appears to have been initiated by western academics starting in the mid-1980s with a Marxist social and political orientation to try to garner support for an anti-caste and anti-Hindu narrative. Over time, they have been joined by various converts to Christianity and Ambedkar Buddhism, both of whose members also display strongly anti-Hindu sentiments. They have also been joined by others who see such views as being “politically correct” and supportive of the low caste without a genuine understanding of the issues involved. Consequently, “Dalit” has become a popular term to label individuals, even though they themselves largely reject the term.

To help prove my point, three years ago in Pune, Maharashtra (where “Dalit” first began to get popularized”) I was invited to give a talk to a group of academics and others on low caste Hindu devotional movements. In the process, I addressed the issue of the term “Dalit” and asked those in the audience if there were any Hindu groups in the state that self-identify with the term. The consensus there was that only non-Hindu groups use the term in that way. The following year, I posted a similar question on RISA-L, arguably the most popular Internet listserve for academics who study South Asia. Again, not a single group was named.

Since the vast majority of those currently identified as “SC” self-identify as Hindu, including nearly all those who I have and continue to study, it would be a great distortion to label them as “Dalit” and a great disservice to the students, especially the Hindu students. In addition, you would be serving the interests of those who continue to try to force an anti-Hindu narrative into the textbooks. In the service of truth, please do not allow the textbooks to be so changed.

Sincerely,  
RL

[note: please excuse the fact that I am not sending this on an official letterhead, but I am currently on a research sabbatical traveling in rural India without access to the same.]